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carmacks' community green thumb

by
Sarah Locke

Dawn Charlie was working in her garden when she first had the idea for the Carmacks greenhouse. "I had a vision of seven skinny cows and seven fat cows. I'm a Christian and I knew it came from the Bible so I looked it up, and saw that it had to do with seven years of good harvests followed by seven years of bad harvests.

"That got me thinking about whether we as a community are ready to grown our own food if we needed to. What if our highways were cut off? Plus there are all of the health benefits of growing your own food," she said.

More than a passing daydream, Charlie's vision led not only to the Carmacks greenhouse, now in its fifth growing season, but also to a number of other gardening and greenhouse projects in the community. They are all operated by the Little Salmon-Carmacks First Nation, and other northern communities have taken note of their success.



The Little Salmon-Carmacks First Nation produces abundant fresh produce in its greenhouse.

(photo: Little Salmon-Carmacks First Nation)

"I did not know it at the time, but I guess we are blazing a new trail," says Charlie. "Since it is a First Nations venture, other First Nations trust what we have to say, and we have mentored a lot of other communities."

The gardening ventures started small. In 1999 the community built a root cellar so that they could store potatoes and carrots through the winter. Next came a small greenhouse and outdoor garden plot. Last year they finished building a new greenhouse, which measures about 400 square metres. They also grow crops on a large field located on the flood plain of the Yukon River.

Both Agriculture Canada and the Yukon government have helped to fund these projects, and Charlie says there are both economic and social benefits. Two band members have full-time jobs working in the greenhouse and gardens during the growing season, and school kids also have helped out with the program.

The produce is intended for local consumption, and most of it is distributed through health and social programs, such as ones for diabetes and for elders. When the harvest is in full swing, any extra produce is sold locally.

The greenhouse crops include tomatoes, cucumbers, green peppers, radishes and chard. "We even have banana plants!" says Charlie. Everything is grown organically, relying mainly on compost instead of chemical fertilizers. Big barrels filled with horse manure are used for making "compost tea." In the past they have used fish emulsion and now are trying a natural fertilizer produced in Faro.

"I've always gardened organically," says Charlie, adding that they have considered applying for organic certification, but have not bothered because "there is too much red tape. We do not have time for it."

Drive around Carmacks and you will also notice small greenhouses and raised garden beds behind many homes. They were built a few years ago for community elders as part of a rural active living program. "We have elders in their 70s working in their greenhouses and gardens and loving it," says Charlie. She says a substantial amount of training was needed to help people get started with their own gardens, as agriculture is not a part of the cultural heritage of northern First Nations.



(photo: Little Salmon-Carmacks First Nation)

While gardening north of 60 always has its challenges, they have also experimented with unusual crops as well as the tried and true varieties. One of Charlie's pet projects was an attempt to grow stevia, a South American plant which produces a natural sugar often used by diabetics. "We tried it for two years but found that in our climate the product was high in sugar because flowering is delayed here, and the plant produces most of its sugar just before it flowers."

Charlie describes the community greenhouse as "the heart of the community," and encourages other First Nations and northern communities to consider similar projects.

"It has economic benefits and social benefits, and just seem to impact the whole community."

For more information on the Carmacks greenhouse, contact the Little Salmon-Carmacks First Nation at (867) 863-5576.



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